How Students Mistake the s-Genitives and the of-Genitives in a Local Ecuadorian Context Learning

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Abstract

Considering a local action research in English learning approach may be the right way to help teacher to manage some of the daily issues they face in their classroom since one of its principle is bridging the traditional divide between educational theory and professional practice (McNiff, 2017). This contribution aims to map the different mistakes students may produce in their learning process in a TESOL[1] context regarding the use of the Saxon genitive or the of-genitive form (Lyons, 1986; Tratz & Hovy, 2013) when expressing ownership of something or talking about things that belong to other things. Since the action research approach is a collaborative systematic inquiry done by teachers to gather information about, and subsequently improve, the ways their particular educational setting operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn. The analysed data are collected through a participatory dynamic process in which students fill in a questionnaire. Before answering the questionnaire, Tourism students in the Amazon State University have been put in contact with the common previously identified mistakes usually made using the possessive / genitive case form in order to identify the situated problem and its causes, and suggest the required corrective actions to undertake. Several sociolinguistic factors such as mother tongue, gender, and cultural background have been identified as possible causes reflecting the geographical location and social proximity of the language in contact approach (Muhvić-Dimanovski, 2005; Hickey, 2013). A discussion, dealing with the result interpretation and the suggested corrective actions, will take place in order to improve the learning process.

Keywords: genitive case, of-genitive, possessive case, learning process, TESOL

Resumen

Considerar una investigación-acción local en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés puede resultar ser un enfoque asertivo para ayudar al docente a aprehender algunas de las problemáticas diarias que encuentren en sus aulas dado que uno de sus principios es construir puentes encima de la tradicional brecha entre teorías educativas y realidades profesionales (McNiff, 2017). Esta propuesta tiene el objetivo de identificar los diferentes errores que pueden producir los estudiantes en su proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje dentro de un contexto TESOL con respeto al uso del genitivo sajón o el genitivo usando la forma "of" (Lyons, 1986; Tratz & Hovy, 2013) cuando expresen la posesión de un objeto o traten de cosas que son partes de otras cosas. Como el enfoque de la investigación-acción es un cuestionamiento colaborativo sistemático realizado por los docentes con el afán de reunir informaciones sobre, y par la misma mejorar, el funcionamiento de los procesos educativos, como enseñan, y como sus estudiantes aprenden. El levantamiento de las informaciones analizadas se consigue a través de un proceso participativo dinámico en el cual los estudiantes llenan un cuestionario. Antes de contestar al cuestionario, los estudiantes de la carrera de turismo de la Universidad Estatal Amazónica estuvieron en contacto los principales errores que se encuentran generalmente en el uso del caso posesivo o de la forma del genitivo con el afán de identificar el problema contextualizado y sus causas, y sugerir las necesarias acciones correctivas a realizar. Varios factores sociolingüísticos como la

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[1] Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

lengua materna, el género, y el entorno cultural fueron identificadas como posibles causas reflejando la ubicación geográfica y el concepto de proximidad social debida a los idiomas en contactos (Muhvić-Dimanovski, 2005; Hickey, 2013). Una discusión, analizando los resultados interpretados y sugiriendo acciones correctivas, se ofrecerá para aportar mejoras al proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: caso posesivo, proceso de aprendizaje, TESOL

Introduction

Mistakes represent an important part of the learning process; the consequences they have on the developed competences or on the produced performances mainly depend on how they have been considered or ignored. During the language learning process, ignored mistakes can result on fossilized inaccuracies in interlanguage (Long, 2003; Han, 2004). According to Selinker (1972), Wei states that "The errors in the use of L2 result mainly from L1, and the difference between L1 and the L2 is the reason for the occurrence of errors. That's why the transfer of L1 rules can lead to fossilization." (2008: 128). This work pretends to share the results of a local action research in English learning approach which has been conducted to analyse the fossilization phenomenon produced by the Tourism School students of the Amazon State University in Ecuador when they have to use possessive / genitive cases to express ownership of something or talking about things that belong to other things.

English and Spanish share a similar post-nominal prepositional possessive genitive which respectively use *of* and *de*: *the door of the kitchen*, *la puerta de la cocina*. Nevertheless, English language presents other genitive structures which are not observed in Spanish: the pre-nominally s-genitive with the marker *'s* like in *James's house* and the juxtaposition in nominal group such as *car engine*.

Grounded on action research approach, a participatory 10-question survey has been applied to the students in order to check their strategies to translate specific Spanish possessive genitive in English (Annex 1). During the outcome analysis, sociolinguistic factors such as mother tongue, gender, and English level have been considered in order to evidence a possible correlation with the selected strategies. In the following result analysis, the students' selected strategies have been compared to the native speakers' production.

Results Interpretation

Statistical analysis of each question has been extracted from the students' answers to reflect their usage tendencies. On the other hand, different n-gram occurrences of answers have been extracted with the *Google N-gram Viewer*© service[2] in order to reflect the native speakers' usage tendencies (Table 1):

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[2] h9tps://books.google.com/ngrams/info

Table 1

Strategy comparisons

#	Students' strategies	Native speakers' usage
1		
2		
3		
4		
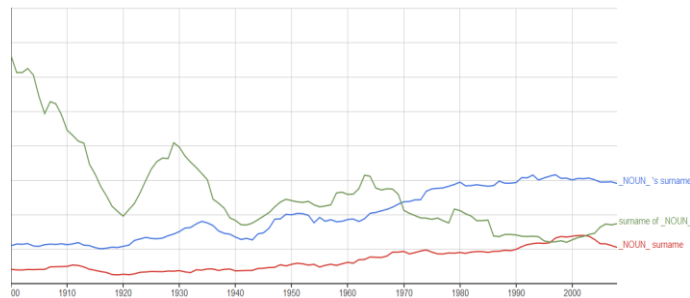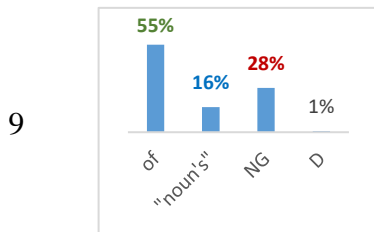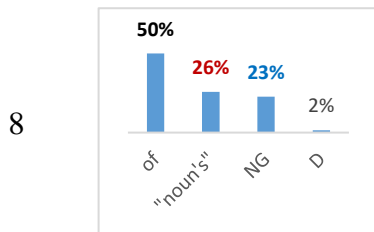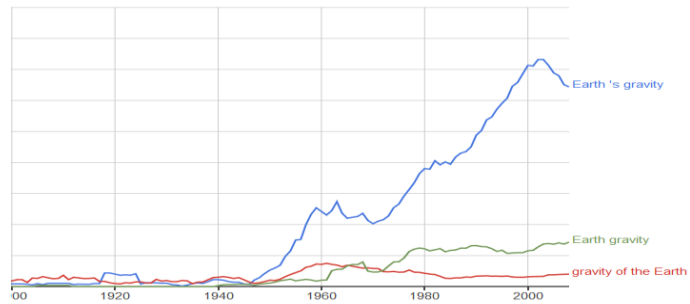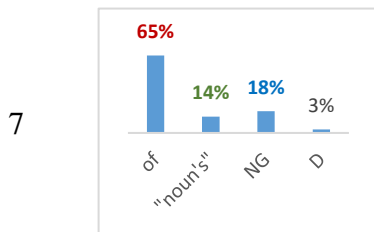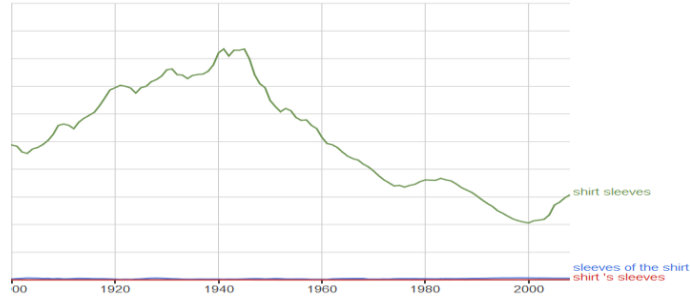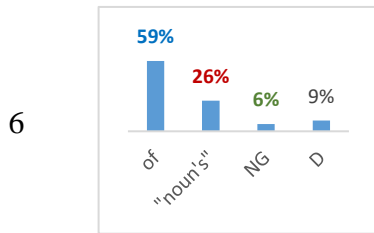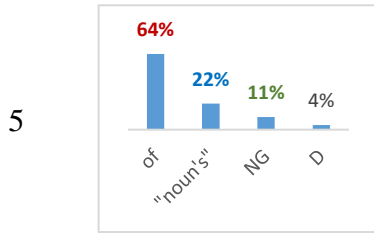
10

Regarding the questions, percentage figures represent the students' structure selection between of-genitive, Saxon genitive, nominal group juxtaposition. The D-percentage reflects the cases they could not make a choice. Plotted graphs evidence the diachronic usage, from 1900 to 2010, of each answer proposal within the English Google®© book corpus. Concerning the first question, *table leg* appears to be the most frequent English speakers' choice: "Her black dress touched the table leg", followed by *leg of the 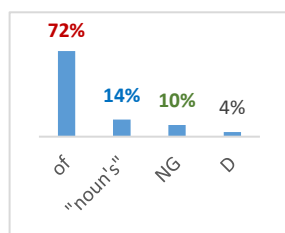table*: e.g. "I held tight to the leg of the table under the table cloth with both hands and awaited my fate", and the expression *table's leg* seems to be anecdotic; while the Spanish learners rather the of-genitive.

Analysing the second question, the difference between Spanish-speaking students and native speakers is evident: Spanish-speaking learners mainly chose the *of-genitive* and when they remembered that another possessive structure may exist, they avoided the use of Saxon genitive. It is possible to observe this difference in all the other questions without any exception even if some students try to apply the Saxon genitive grammar rule when a person is involved in the possession expression (Question 4, 5).

Beside this first outcome, in Question 3, English speakers tend to forget the apostrophe in the expression "friends' car"; and in all the questions where an object is involved in the possessive expression, they prefer to use the nominal group juxtaposition than the of-genitive (Questions 1, 6, 7, and 8). Sometimes, it is important to make references to the context and, subsequently, analysing the structure in use. In Question 4, the selection may have been chosen based on semantic differences:

The girl's smile broadens slowly.

The girl in the rocking chair had a lovely, little girl smile.

In the first case a predicate can be used to reflect the meaning: the smile belongs to a specific girl in the first example, while a "girl smile" can be interpreted as a kind of smile.

In the following set of examples, the first denotes that the relative pronoun "who" implies the of-genitive structure use. However, the second reflects the other possible structure which does not have any relation with possession concept.

I am even in the smile of the girl who fascinates you.

To make the girl smile up.

It is also possible to explain the choice regarding the kind of discourse in which the expression is used. In Question 7, *Earth gravity* is more frequent in scientific publications which deal with the force attraction, while *Earth's gravity* appears in novel where Earth is personified:

Breaking free of Earth's Gravity.[3]

In the last question, context analysis leads to different explanations:

After she arrives, my sister's friend also comes over.

She's actually the sister of my friend Toby.

While in the first example, the author considers important to link the *friend* to the *sister*. In this second example, the post-modifier *Toby* leads to an of-genitive structure since "… my friend's sister Toby" may be confusing.

Despite the specific usages that could be described in a deeper analysis, a first approximation leads to an of-genitive overgeneralization due to a L1 syntactical structure transfer (Figure 1).
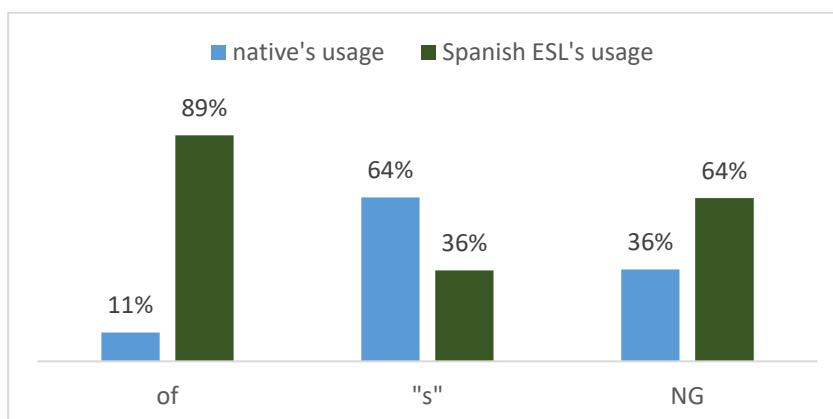
Figure 1
Percentage of students' usages compared to natives' usages

In the questionnaire, only 11% of the students' employed the of-genitive like native speakers; two thirds of them use the Saxon genitive like a native speaker, but only one third of the students chose the nominal group juxtaposition when native speakers choose this structure. As it can be observed in Fig. 2, the above analysis can be considered stable regarding the sociolinguistic factors:

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[3] Angela Vela's novel published in 2010

Figure 2

Percentage of students' usages compared to natives' usages according the different sociolinguistic factors.

The fact that the considered sociolinguistic factors do not influence the results confirm that the observed of-genitive overgeneralisation stems from the L1 genitive structure transfer since the Spanish is what all the students have in common in this particular English learning process context.
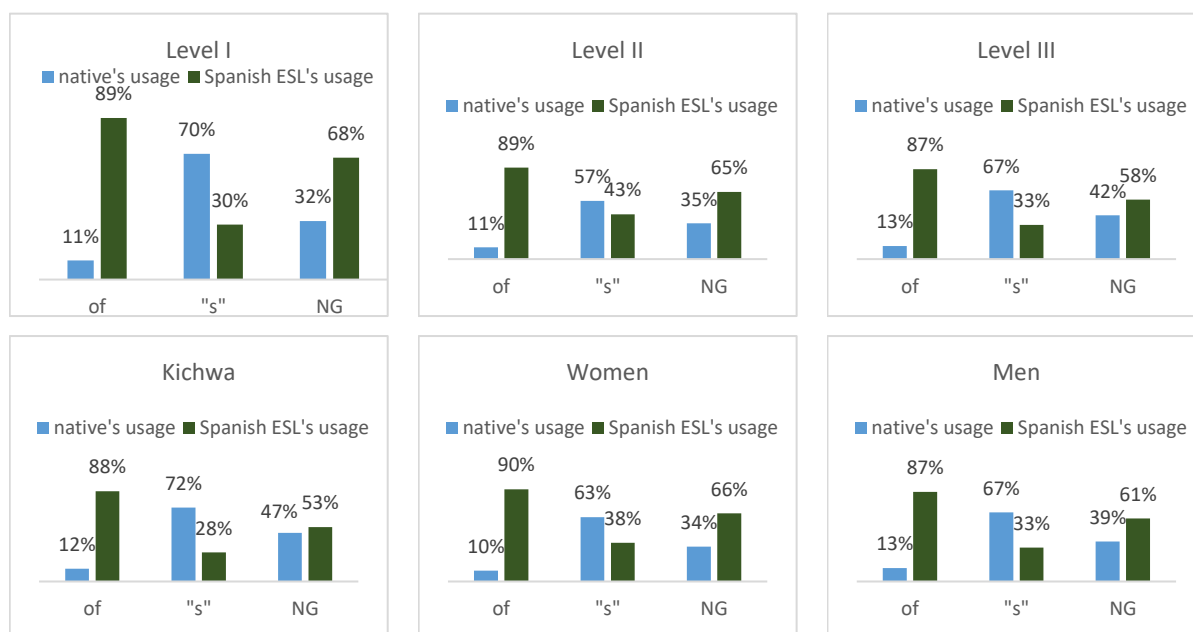
Conclusion

In order to improve the English learning process and minimize the of-genitive overgeneralisation, as teachers, it may be important to focus on native usages to complete the grammatical rule we teach comparing the L1 available strategies to the English ones before assessing students' communicative competences or performances. Building bridges between L1 to TL (Target Language) may avoid fossilisation and help students to be flexible enough to understand why native speakers can produce texts such as: "My sister friend told my sister Louise that my husband took my sister friend brand new towel and dried his dog off after he gave the Dog a bath. My sister friend told my sister Louise that she argued with my husband[4]" (Lavern Lincoln, 2017). If students have not received the necessary information to develop their sociocultural and pragmatic competencies as they are described in the Common European Framework, after reading these kinds of texts, they may conclude the teacher was wrong when he explained "sister friend" was a mistake.

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[4] From Lavel Lincoln's novel: "My family history: my life in Charleston" published in 2017.

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Annexe I - ENCUESTA

Objetivo: identificar los errores en el uso del caso posesivo en inglés

Género: Masculino   □   Femenino   □

Edad: 18-22 □   23-30 □   31-36 □   37-41 □   42-50 □   + 50 □

Nivel de Inglés cursado: 1ero □   2ndo □   3ero □   4to □   5to □

Comunidad o ciudad donde vivió su niñez: _____

Lengua materna: _____

Indicaciones: Por favor, lea los enunciados en español y escoja la respuesta correcta.

1.- ¿Cómo se dice en inglés "la pata de la mesa"?

The leg of the table   □   table leg □   table's leg   □   desconozco   □

2.- ¿Cómo se dice en inglés "El cabello del señor es rojo"?

The hair of the man's red   □ The man hair's red □   The man's hair's red   □
   desconozco   □

3.- ¿Cómo se dice en inglés "Los carros de mis amigos"?

My friends' car □   The car of my friends □   My friends car □   desconozco
        □

4.- ¿Cómo se dice en inglés "La sonrisa de la niña"?

The smile of the girl   □   The girl's smile   □   The girl smile □
        desconozco   □

5.- ¿Cómo se dice en inglés "El hijo del nuevo profesor"?

The new teacher's son   □   The son of the new teacher   □   The   new
teacher son   □   desconozco   □

6.- ¿Cómo se dice en inglés "Las mangas de la camisa"?

The sleeves of the shirt   □   The shirt's sleeves   □   The   shirt   sleeves
        □   desconozco   □

7.- ¿Cómo se dice en inglés "La gravedad de la tierra"?

The Earth's gravity   □   The gravity of the Earth □   The   Earth   gravity
        □   desconozco   □

8.- ¿Cómo se dice en inglés "El aeropuerto de Miami"?

The airport of Miami   □   The Miami's airport   □   The   Miami   airport
        □   desconozco   □

9.- ¿Cómo se dice en inglés "El apellido de Marco es Rivera"?

Marco's surname's Rivera   □ Marco surname's Rivera   □ The   surname   of
Marco is Rivera   □   desconozco   □

10.- ¿Cómo se dice en inglés "La hermana de mi amiga es profesora"?

My sister's friend's a teacher ☐ The sister of my friend's a teacher ☐ My sister friend's a teacher ☐ desconozco ☐